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BRENT TARTER

Bacon's Rebellion, the Grievances of the People, and the Political Culture of Seventeenth-Century Virginia

The first of the warships bearing the thousand or more soldiers that King Charles II sent to Virginia to suppress Bacon's Rebellion and the three commissioners he sent to ascertain its causes arrived at the end of January 1677—January 1676 by the old calendar. By then the rebellion had collapsed, and Nathaniel Bacon, its namesake leader, was dead of dysentery and other loathsome afflictions. Governor Sir William Berkeley and men loyal to his administration had rounded up most of the remaining leaders, and Berkeley had tried them before courts martial and hanged them. He had put down the largest and most violent uprising of white people that took place in any of England's North American colonies before the one that began exactly a century later. He was old, tired, angry, partially deaf, and very perplexed at how such a bloody rebellion could have broken out in the colony that he had governed with success for twenty-six of the previous thirty-four years—almost 40 percent of its entire history. Berkeley was a bitter man when he climbed aboard the flagship of the fleet to greet the commissioners and the commanders of the force that arrived too late to help.

He knew one of the commissioners: Francis Moryson had lived in Virginia in the 1640s during Berkeley's first administration as governor, was speaker of the House of Burgesses in 1656, compiled one of the first printed digests of the colonial laws, sat on the governor's Council early in the 1660s during Berkeley's second administration, and was acting governor of the colony from the spring of 1661 to the autumn of 1662. In 1677, though,

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Moryson was the king's agent and no longer the governor's ally. The other two commissioners had no personal knowledge of Virginia and were strangers to Berkeley. Sir John Berry was a career naval officer and commander of the fleet that the king sent to Virginia, and Col. Herbert Jeffreys was a career army officer and the commander of the regiment that the king also sent.¹

Berkeley got on poorly with them. The commissioners brought the king's order summoning the governor back to London to report to him in person and empowering Jeffreys to supplant Berkeley as lieutenant governor. The old governor may have interpreted that as a royal rebuke or statement of no confidence. Berkeley did not leave for three months, until well after his relationship with the commissioners had deteriorated to exchanging insults, some veiled, some not. He was frustrated and angry about everything that had happened since the previous spring, and he soon grew frustrated and angry about the officious behavior of the commissioners, who undermined his authority and issued orders as well as asked questions. Berkeley's deafness made his initial discussions with the commissioners difficult. They had to shout at him to be heard, and like many hearing-impaired people, he probably shouted at them, too, unaware of how he sounded to them. They acted as if angry with each other even before they were.²

When Berkeley met with the commissioners aboard the king's warship on the first day of February, he read through the voluminous papers and royal instructions that they brought, and on the next day he wrote a long and detailed account of his handling of the rebellion for the information of his king and of his king's ministers. On the third day of the month, the governor addressed a letter to each of the twenty county sheriffs, sending them the commissioners' request that they "make enquiry after the aggrevances of his Majesties Subjects in Virginia to rectify the said abuses, administring equity to every man without respect of persons, and to report the same to His Majestie."³

The commissioners also interviewed and received complaints from a significant number of individual Virginians about the governor's violent suppression of the rebellion and his rough treatment of the rebels and their families. Later in the spring when the commissioners prepared their long report—known as Samuel Wiseman's Book of Record, named for the

commissioners' secretary whose handwritten copy survives—they included the texts or summaries of many of those individual complaints and interviews, preserving much evidence about Berkeley's bad behavior in the aftermath of the rebellion; but even though the commissioners also included a long section that appeared to be derived from the county grievances, as they were called, that summary is not much more than a skeletal tabulation. It is extremely sketchy and misleading and omitted the most important parts, the testimony about conditions before the rebellion that contributed to the widespread violence of 1676. Officials in England who read the report consequently learned more than enough to condemn Berkeley for his actions in suppressing the rebellion, but they did not read or learn anything about the civil discontent that explained how and why a perceived threat from the Indians became a widespread revolt against the king's governor.⁴

Most historians of Bacon's Rebellion have overlooked or neglected the county grievances. Some may have taken at face value the commissioners' statement that the county grievances contained no explanation for the rebellion and therefore did not regard the documents as important or read them carefully; or perhaps they assumed that the questions that the commissioners propounded were merely leading questions that adduced nothing more than additional evidence of Berkeley's heavy-handed suppression of the rebellion. The leading narrative interpretations therefore missed or neglected to take full advantage of a rich documentary source that preserves the perspectives and also the revealing language of hundreds of middling and lower-class white men, the very class of men who joined Bacon in rebelling. If the full, difficult manuscript texts of all of the county grievances, the majority of which have never been published, are considered in the context of the institutional and political history of Virginia, the important and neglected evidence that they contain about conditions in the colony on the eve of the rebellion and about the attitudes of people who joined the rebellion suggests different interpretations of the causes and of some of the episodes of Bacon's Rebellion.⁵



Historians of Bacon's Rebellion have suggested different causes and consequences for the event. Robert Beverley published the first narrative history in 1705 and confessed that the causes remained cloaked in mystery. A century after Beverley wrote, John Daly Burk likened Bacon's Rebellion to the American Revolution that began almost miraculously one hundred years after Bacon's Rebellion, a romantic assumption that allowed Burk to magnify the roles that Virginia and his own patron, Thomas Jefferson, played in the Revolution by adducing a supposed precedent. Burk's interpretation influenced most of the other writers on Virginia's colonial and revolutionary history throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century.⁶

Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker's *Torchbearer of the Revolution: The Story of Bacon's Rebellion and Its Leader* (1940), one of the worst books on Virginia that a reputable scholarly historian ever published, portrayed Bacon as a proto-Thomas Jefferson and the rebellion as a rehearsal for the American Revolution. Wertenbaker repeatedly referred to Berkeley as tyrannical, dictatorial, and despised during the years previous to the rebellion without once citing any sources for those adjectives, which fly in the face of much of the evidence in the sources that he employed. He resolutely ignored other evidence in those sources that contradicted his portrayal of Bacon. Wertenbaker described Bacon's attacks on friendly Indian tribes as great victories against Indian enemies and did not admit that all but one of the attacks he launched were against friendly Indians. Wertenbaker did not make much use of the county grievances and scarcely mentioned them in his bibliographical essay.⁷

In what is still the best narrative of the events of the rebellion, Wilcomb E. Washburn, in *The Governor and the Rebel: A History of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia* (1957), exploited an abundance of manuscript material in England that no previous writer had consulted. He interpreted the outbreak of the rebellion as largely a response to Indian attacks on the frontiers. Washburn began his account with frontier conflicts in 1675 and did not look further back in time in search of other reasons than danger from the Indians that could have provoked people into joining Bacon in the summer of 1676. He did not make intensive use of the county grievances, which might have alerted him to some of the long-standing social discontent that undoubtedly influenced those colonists. Although Washburn's work thoroughly

discredited Wertenbaker's, it did not adequately explain the origins of Bacon's Rebellion.⁸

Bernard Bailyn's influential 1959 article, "Politics and Social Structure in Virginia," blamed "a profound disorganization of European society in its American setting" for the occasional outbreaks of violence and the small- and large-scale rebellions that occurred in most of the English colonies during the seventeenth century. Englishmen in England and in England's colonies shared a long tradition of rioting under stressful conditions, and stressful social instability and unrest persisted in Virginia, Bailyn wrote, until the final decade of the century, when native local elites and a few families of wealth and prominence were finally able to dominate both county and provincial governments and impose social and political stability on the lower orders of society.⁹

Edmund S. Morgan's equally influential *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (1975) made some effective use of the county grievances in a short section on the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion, which he portrayed as a logical consequence and an extreme example of the chronic social and political instability in the colony that Bailyn had described. Morgan's detailed study of seventeenth-century Virginia treated the unruly behavior of servants, slaves, and landless young men as evidence that the colony's planters and institutions of government were ineffective in imposing order and maintaining control.¹⁰

Midway between the publication of Bailyn's essay and Morgan's book, Warren M. Billings made what is still the most thorough and careful analysis of the social structure and the nature and extent of social problems in Virginia at the time of Bacon's Rebellion. His 1968 doctoral dissertation demonstrated that indebtedness and local taxation rates produced widespread discontent, especially among the small farmers and the landless men in the colony. In two scholarly articles that he later published, Billings suggested that the development of strong parish and county governments weakened the central authority of the provincial government and contributed to the inability of Berkeley, his Council of State, and the General Assembly to ameliorate local problems or to stem the tide of revolt once it gained headway and drew discontented lower-class Virginians into the rebellion.¹¹

While Billings was later writing a biography of the governor and compiling an edition of Berkeley's papers, he modified his belief that an accretion of power in the county governments was at the expense of effective political leadership in Jamestown. His revised view reflected the substance of several excellent studies that appeared beginning in the 1980s of families, communities, and counties and of the operations of the General Assembly and other institutions of provincial government that disclosed that socially and politically the colony was not so poorly served as Bailyn had suggested and Morgan had supposed. The new scholarship demonstrated that Bailyn erred in assuming that there was no class of wealthy, influential, and respectable native-born elites—a mini-aristocracy for Virginia—capable of overseeing the working classes during the decades between the death or departure of the first generation of leaders in the 1620s and 1630s and the 1690s. In fact, the colony's leading landed families handed down their property and their prestige from generation to generation through marriages of daughters and widows to ambitious immigrants, preserving but partially concealing those families' continuing social dominance through a succession of surname changes. Moreover, the colony's political institutions developed into stable and well-functioning organs of local and provincial administration.¹²

The authors of the social and institutional studies did not offer an explanation for Bacon's Rebellion or provide a convincing alternative to Morgan's interpretation of the rebellion as a logical consequence of chronic unrest in the population of people who participated in the rebellion. Nor did they provide additional evidence for or in any way refute Stephen Saunders Webb's *1676: The End of American Independence* (1984), which cited the county grievances several times but only for some compelling incidents and not to adduce the rebellion's causes. Webb appeared to locate the root cause of Bacon's Rebellion in the new empire's weak and ineffective administration of its overseas colonies.¹³

Billings's 1968 warning not to neglect the county grievances, which he accurately described as "the only corpus of information about those issues agitating some colonists to the point of rebellion," has gone largely unheeded. Taking the county grievances seriously permits a reconsideration of the causes of the rebellion and the significance of some of its events and also offers insights into the political culture of seventeenth-century Virginia. It

was in the interactions of men in the localities, as both Bailyn and Billings separately suggested, that men and women found reasons to join Nathaniel Bacon in the summer of 1676, although not entirely for the reasons that Bailyn and Morgan advanced.¹⁴



In the decades between the meeting of the first General Assembly in 1619 and the outbreak of Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, Virginia changed remarkably. It became the English king's first royal colony in 1625, and its population increased by a factor of several times and spread over much of the land on both sides of the Chesapeake Bay and along the rivers as far west and north as the tides flowed. Two deadly Powhatan attacks in 1622 and 1644 temporarily retarded but did not halt that expansion, and following the second attack the colonial government so overwhelmed the Indians that English-speaking Virginians cultivated their tobacco in comparative peace. The governors and the assembly delegated authority over many day-to-day matters to local military and civil officers, creating the first of the counties to which Berkeley sent the commissioners' request for information. In each county, parish vestries oversaw the religious and moral welfare of the people, and a county court, presided over by justices of the peace whom the governor appointed, settled local disputes and maintained order. The county sheriffs served writs, arrested miscreants, collected taxes, and occasionally conducted elections; the clerks recorded deeds and wills and kept the county's public records; and the surveyors marked property boundaries and drew plats, guaranteeing to the tobacco planters their titles to their valuable land. Those parish vestries and county courts, and the comparatively prosperous men who sat on them, created twenty local polities and sets of leaders from whom the county's voters from time to time elected the county's burgesses.

After Berkeley's decision in 1643 to have the burgesses sit apart from the governor and Council members in a bicameral legislature, the landowning tobacco planters in the House of Burgesses, supported by their neighbors and relatives at home and on the county courts, became the representatives of their class and their interests. Together, they and Berkeley fashioned public policies that promoted landownership, attempted to regulate the

behavior of indentured and enslaved laborers, protected commerce with English and Dutch merchants, and sought high prices for the leaf tobacco that was the principal source of income for them all. In 1662 the assembly instituted in Virginia the old English practice of requiring the parish churchwardens to assemble all of the landowners every fourth year to perambulate their property lines, renewing marks and renewing individual and collective memories in order that everyone's property be known and secured.¹⁵

By such means the owners of land, who were nearly all white and for the most part male, avoided disputes among themselves as much as possible and created a political system that reflected the social and economic systems and gave a measure of security and stability. As if to fortify the relationship between tobacco planters and the government, in 1670 the General Assembly adopted a law that restricted the suffrage to those "ffreeholders and housekeepers who only are answerable to the publique for the levies." That is, the assembly declared that only men who owned taxable property were sufficiently invested in the welfare of the country to be allowed to take part in its governance, just as in England where, as the new law explained, English laws "grant a voyce in such election only to such as by their estates real or personall have interest enough to tye them to the endeavour of the publique good."¹⁶

Until the rebellion broke out in 1676, it had all seemed to work. The colony escaped most of the convulsions that plagued England during its civil wars, even though white Virginians experienced occasional episodes of violence on the frontiers, persistent and annoying local problems with laborers of the kind that everyone had everywhere, and some frictions between churchmen and Puritans or Quakers. At the middle of the century some merchant-planters began acquiring a larger proportion of their labor force from the African slave trade, allowing some trading and planting families to prosper disproportionately; but so long as most or all of the tobacco planters shared the same objectives and hazards, Berkeley's policy of regulating the Indian trade so as to reduce chances of frontier violence and his participation with them in the tobacco economy created what appeared to them to be practical and generally profitable political and economic systems.¹⁷



The rebellion that Nathaniel Bacon led broke out early in 1676 and was a complete surprise, not only that it happened at all but also that it swept up in it a great many people in eastern Virginia—including tobacco planters, indentured servants and enslaved laborers, and even women—who did not appear to be immediately threatened by its most evident cause, which was fear of renewed Indian attacks on the margins of the western and northern settled areas. Scattered fighting between colonists and Doegs and other tribes on the edges of the frontier in 1675 and 1676 and receipt of news early in 1676 of fighting in New England (known as King Philip's War) caused Nathaniel Bacon and other men living near the fall line of the James River to assemble into a martial band and begin attacking Indians and demanding that the governor raise a force to defend the colony. Berkeley summoned the General Assembly back into session in March 1676, but it could do little more than create a mobile army of 500 men and plan to erect and man a few posts on the frontier. A drought had ruined the tobacco crop, plunging people into debt, and taxes were already high in the colony for two reasons: the governor's proposal to buy out the proprietors of the Northern Neck (the land between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers), which the king had granted to a set of court favorites; and huge expenses that the governor and assembly had undertaken during two recent wars with the Dutch when the king and his ministers commanded that a large fort be built at Point Comfort at the mouth of the James River, a fort that could not possibly be of any practical use because of the breadth of the river and the shallowness of the near-shore water.¹⁸

Bacon raised a volunteer army in the spring, and fighting between that army and the Indians, as well as threatened violence between that army and the government, led Berkeley to call for an election and summon a new assembly for June 1676. There, late in the session, he faced down Bacon in a dramatic scene. The governor literally bared his chest and invited the rebel leader to shoot him. Berkeley vacillated between trying to protect the frontier settlers and not disturb the generally peaceful trading relationships he had fashioned with the tribes in the interior. The June 1676 assembly created a thousand-man army, one-fifth of which was cavalry, and specified how many men each county's militia commanders were to recruit or impress into the service. When Bacon threatened the governor he also threatened the

assembly members and in effect extorted from them a commission as the general of the new army. The law so named him, and the governor, against his better judgment, reluctantly agreed. "How miserable that man is," Berkeley grumbled a few days after the assembly adjourned, "that Governes a People wher six parts of seaven at least are Poore Endebted Discontented and Armed and to take away their Armes now the Indians are at our Throats were to rayse an Universall mutiny."¹⁹

In the end, Bacon's impetuous leadership of thousands of frightened men overwhelmed Berkeley's irresolute prudence and plunged the colony into a full-scale civil war that resulted in scores or perhaps hundreds of people being killed and the capital city of Jamestown burned to the ground. Men loyal to Bacon and other men loyal to Berkeley (and some who switched sides) plundered their enemies' farms or ran amuck and plundered at will. Most surprisingly of all, once the rebellion began to gather force, men and women who lived far from the settlements where Indian raids were a possibility also took sides with Bacon against Berkeley's government. It appeared that the widespread participation of people in the rebellion involved more than fear of Indian attacks. But what? And how seriously were they (and are we) to take the implications of Bacon's public pronouncements against the governor to which he signed himself "General, by the consent of the people"?²⁰

Virginia politicians and imperial administrators then as well as historians ever since have debated the many answers that those questions produced. Had Samuel Wiseman's *Book of Record* reported on the substance and details of the county grievances with the same thoroughness that it reported on the complaints about Berkeley's actions in suppressing the rebellion, royal officials in the seventeenth century and historians and their readers in the twentieth century would have understood that important event in different ways. The commissioners casually dismissed the grievances contained in the reports from the counties as "soe few and Triviall" that they could not have set off the rebellion, and they shifted attention to Berkeley even before completing the report by complaining "that if the Governour and his Party would leave off their depredations, and Answer to those matters hee by his Majestie is Instructed and by us desired to doe, Wee can see noe urgent occasion to stay a fortnight longer upon the Place." That conclusion, which the

commissioners reached after being in the colony for two months and coming to loggerheads in their dealings with Berkeley, indicates that the commissioners were by then inclined to blame Berkeley and his adherents for the colony's problems both before and after the rebellion rather than to blame the leaders of the rebellion for beginning it or to look and listen carefully for the sources of discontent. The commissioners either suppressed—or more likely missed entirely—the import of much of what the county grievances contained.²¹

One thing that the commissioners did not report, either from hearing the county grievances or the numerous personal complaints of colonists, was widespread dissatisfaction with royal government *per se*, although that is how some later writers interpreted Bacon's rebellion against the king's governor. The first complaint that the commissioners heard about on their arrival and the only complaint in the county grievances that they seriously regarded afterward was that the governor had summoned the General Assembly too often and that county taxpayers were consequently overburdened paying what they characterized as exorbitant rates of compensation that the assembly members voted themselves for their attendance at the annual meetings. The commissioners merely recommended that the General Assembly pass a law specifying that it meet every other year and no oftener and that burgesses' expense allowances be reduced.²²

The commissioners did not comment on Berkeley's not calling for new elections of members of the General Assembly at any time since 1660, shortly after he was restored to the governorship and Charles II was restored to the throne. Whenever a member of the House of Burgesses died or resigned or got promoted to the Council or moved out of his county, the governor called a special election to fill that seat, so from time to time the men of every county selected a new burgess, even though there was no general election at all for sixteen years. It is unclear whether landowning Virginians or the men who were disfranchised in 1670 believed that frequent elections were important or essential features of their representative government. By the year of the rebellion, though, Berkeley acknowledged that some people felt aggrieved by the long continuance of the assembly—known in the literature of Virginia's history as the Long Assembly, as if it were equivalent to the Long Parliament of Charles I—and in May when he ordered a

general election he stated as much in his writ that the secretary of the colony sent to each of the county sheriffs who conducted the election.²³

Had the commissioners looked beneath the surface of the county grievances and the personal complaints and paid closer attention to the recent history of the colony, they might have come closer to discovering the causes of the rebellion or developed a more sensitive appreciation of the reasons other than fear of the Native Americans that drew people into it. But it is entirely possible that the three royal commissioners were as deaf to the nuances of the language of the common men of Virginia as the old governor was to the actual voices of nearly everybody.

The commissioners' report took no notice that the county grievances exhibited interesting similarities and differences that revealed some important information about the complaints and the men who complained. Some of the county grievances were signed, and some were not. There are no extant records describing the gatherings at which the texts were agreed to or subscribed or any indication for most of the counties how many men participated. (None contains the signature or mark of a woman.) The documents with a small number of signatures may have been authenticated in that manner, but those with dozens or scores of autographs and marks may possibly represent a broader support for the assertions than the documents that only a few men signed. Surry County residents submitted two differing sets of complaints, and two groups of men in Isle of Wight County submitted competing documents. From Nansemond County the commissioners received at least three, perhaps four, sets of grievances. The commissioners' report cryptically characterized the substance of that county's grievances differently than in the transcription that Samuel Wiseman authenticated of an unlocated manuscript and also differently than in the two extant originals, one bearing forty-one signatures and seventy-two marks and the other from "his Majtie. Poor butt Loyall Subjects of Nansemond," which has thirty-four signatures and twelve marks.²⁴

The commissioners received or preserved no record of grievances from Middlesex County, residence of Robert Beverley, one of Berkeley's most active allies in suppressing the rebellion and father of the historian; and they received nothing from Charles City County until the middle of May, after they had completed the bulk of their report. The submission from

Accomack County, on the Eastern Shore, bore ten signatures and made an unusual request. Its authors declared that “Whereas wee are Sensible of the vast Charge this Unhappy Warr and Rebellion hath put the Country to: and it must be Expected to be defrayed out of the Country wee desire wee may bee Excluded from all and Every parte of the same (Wee being no way the Cause of it).”²⁵

Nearly all of the county grievances complained that the governor called the assembly into session too often and that the burgesses voted themselves large per diem allowances and tavern bills that the county's taxpayers had to pay. Most of the county documents also charged that other taxes were too high. The assembly had long placed an export tax on tobacco, at the rate of two shillings per hogshead (a cask that held about a thousand pounds of compressed leaf tobacco), to defray the ordinary expenses of the colony's government. The colony also provided a large plantation for the governor and a smaller one for the secretary of the colony, the assembly had long since exempted members of the governor's Council of State from paying taxes, and county courts and parish vestries also routinely exempted from taxation elderly and infirm people who were not economically productive. Men from nearly all of the counties complained about the high taxes assessed for constructing the obviously useless and ruinous fort at Point Comfort and another that was never even completed at Jamestown; and some of them mentioned other taxes levied for purposes that they claimed not to know—probably for erecting public buildings in the capital and for attempting to buy out the proprietors of the Northern Neck. No set of grievances complained about the land tax, called a quitrent, that all property owners paid to the king or about any of the customs charges and duties that acts of Parliament required be collected at the colony's port of entry. A few men complained that the defenseless state of the colony could be attributed in part to the failure of royal customs officers to collect what were called castle duties, gunpowder and shot that captains of ships were to supply when clearing through port.

The similarities among the documents rather than the differences impressed the royal commissioners and may have diverted their attention from asking an important question: whether the differences suggested that at least some of the causes of the rebellion were of local origin. High taxes

that the General Assembly levied with little or nothing to show for it were a common complaint, but the commissioners ignored the almost universal complaints in the county grievances about local taxes. The men of most counties also complained about high county and parish taxes and the manner in which the county courts levied them. All of the taxes were levied at a rate of so many pounds of tobacco per poll, or person: that is, every head of a household and every laboring man (called a “tithable” because each was required to pay the parish rates as well as the county taxes) was assessed the same amount, and every paid or indentured or enslaved laborer, whether white or black, male or female, was also assessed the same amount, the employer or owner being responsible for payment. Those taxes paid for the construction and maintenance of courthouses and jails, and parish taxes paid the expenses of churches, ministers’ salaries, and for taking care of the poor and the orphaned. Several sets of grievances requested in strong language that when justices of the peace met to set the annual tax rate they not be allowed to go into secret session. Some even requested that a few popularly selected taxpayers be permitted to take part in the public assessment of the local taxes. Throughout the complaints about local taxation ran two themes: one was about how high the taxes were without benefiting the people at large; the other was that the manner of taxation appeared to benefit the people with property—the tobacco planters—at the expense of people who owned little or no land or raised little or no tobacco but were required to pay high taxes in tobacco, anyway.

Most of the complaints, particularly those with large numbers of signatures and marks, singled out the county poll tax as the most serious complaint and recommended that all taxes be assessed on the land that people owned as a more nearly fair method of raising taxes. “We humbly propose,” the James City County complaints (and several others) suggested, “the raisinge of our taxes & Cuntry dues, to be by a Land tax, & according to the estate & abillity of the Inhabitants of this Collony.” The Isle of Wight County document, perhaps the least literate of them all, also complained about how poor people were at the mercy of wealthy and well-connected people. Their scribe wrote, “Whereas ther are some great persons both in honor, rich in estat and have severall ways of gaines and profitts are exempted from paying Leavies and the poorest inhabitant being compeld to pay the

great taxes which wee are burdened with having a hogshead or two of tobacco to pay for rent and near two hundred yearly for Leavies having a wife and two or three children to maintain whether our taxes are not the greater by such favour and privileges granted them which wee desire to be safe of by their paying of Leavies as well as wee they having noe necessitie from being soe exempted." The poorest, unsurprisingly, resented being taxed or overtaxed when the wealthiest were untaxed or undertaxed.²⁶

The men from Henrico County, where Nathaniel Bacon resided, also objected that local magistrates acted against the interests of the people and in their own interest. They complained, "It is a very greate Greevance that wee have these many years laine under heavy & unsupportable taxes officially Sixty pounds of tobacco for each tithable for 2 years following. . . . Wee are much Greeved that the major pt of the Commissioners of our County Court are men of a Consanguinity, and wee farther Report that noe County or Parish leave bee levyed without at least six of the Comonalty such as the County or Parish shall make Choyse of to sit with the Comissioners when the same is levied." That at least some of the justices of the peace—who were sometimes called commissioners of the peace—were "men of a Consanguinity"—that is, closely related to each other—made their actions appear even more devious and self-serving.²⁷

Some Surry County residents likewise requested "that for the future the Collectors of the Leavy (who Instead of Satisfaction were wont to give Churlish Answers) may be obliged to render Account In writing what the leavy is for to any that Shall desire it." Other residents of the same county declared "That itt has been the custome of the County Courts att the Laying of the Levy to withdraw into A privat Roome by means the poore people not knowing for what they paid the levy did allwayes admitt how theire taxes, should be so high." From Northampton County came a pair of recommendations on that subject: "That no person may be sett tax free" unless by a vote of a full bench of justices of the peace; and "That our County Records may be free open for Every man to Search and Require Copies as there occasions from time to time shall and may Require . . . paying the Clerk his Just fees."²⁸

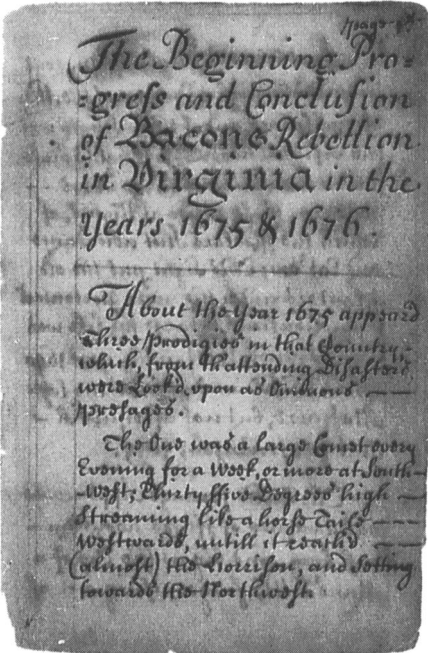
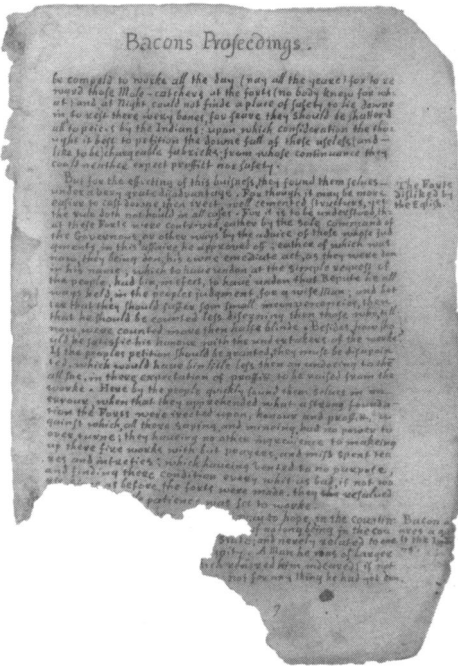
What was wrong, the men who agreed to most of the county grievances complained, was not just that taxes were too high and that the assembly met



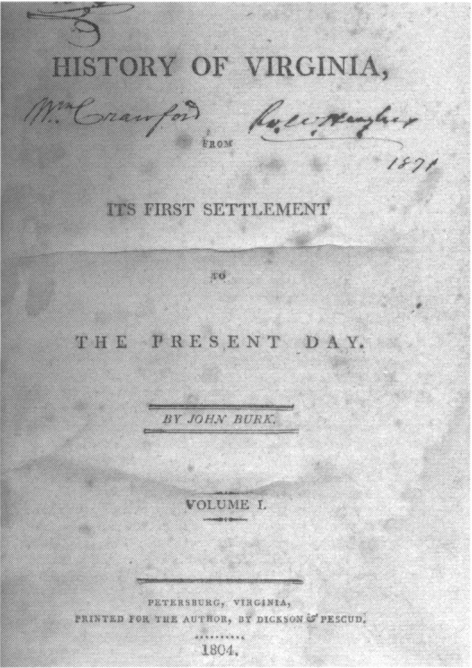
(Left): Sir William Berkeley (1605–1677) was governor of Virginia from 1642 to 1652 and from 1660 to 1677. He was the most influential and important English-speaking political leader in seventeenth-century Virginia, but his reputation suffered as a consequence of the manner in which he suppressed Bacon's Rebellion. (Below): There is no portrait of Nathaniel Bacon (1647–1676). All that exist are conjectural images published during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as this one from M. T. Magill's *History of Virginia* (1890). (Left: *Virginia Historical Society*, accession no. 2003.161.30.A; below: *Virginia Historical Society*, call no. Rare Books F226.B95)



John Cotton of York County, a Virginian who witnessed Bacon's Rebellion, wrote an account in 1677, entitled *Bacon's Proceedings*, shortly after the rebellion's conclusion. His wife, Ann Cotton, later prepared a shorter narrative based on his. (*Virginia Historical Society*, call no. Mss2 C8295a1)

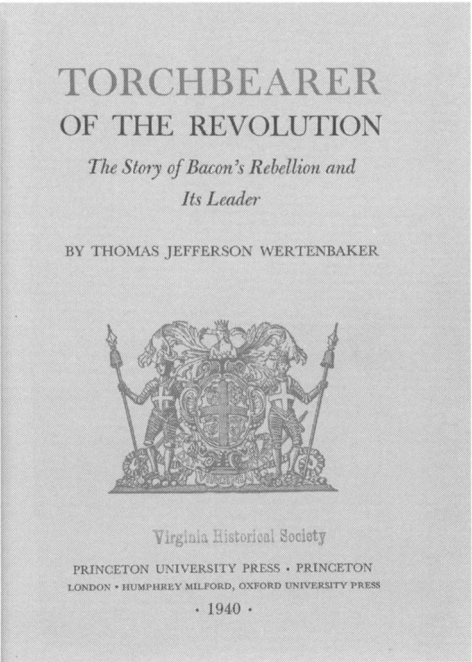


Thomas Mathew, a burgess for Stafford County in the June 1676 assembly, was another eyewitness to the rebellion. He wrote a history of the event in 1705 and entitled it *The Beginning, Progress, and Conclusion of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia in the Years 1675 & 1676*. (Library of Congress)



John Daly Burk's *History of Virginia from Its First Settlement to the Present Day* (1804) influenced several generations of writers. His account of Bacon's Rebellion, for the first time, linked the events of 1676 with the American Revolution of 1776. (*Virginia Historical Society, call no. Rare Books F226.B95*)

From the publication of John Daly Burk's account of Bacon's Rebellion in his *History of Virginia* (1804) until after Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker's *Torchbearer of the Revolution: The Story of Bacon's Rebellion and Its Leader* (1940), most historians erroneously treated Bacon's Rebellion as a revolt against British misrule. Later scholarship and the contents of the neglected county grievances have overturned that interpretation. (*Virginia Historical Society, call no. F229.W496*)



too often, which is what the commissioners heard and reported, but that the class of landed men who made the laws and ran the parish and county governments were unfairly taxing the poor and the landless, who since passage of the 1670 act limiting who could vote were without a voice in selecting the men who levied the colony's taxes. Because the governor appointed members of the county courts, usually following recommendations from the justices of the peace, themselves, no taxpayers had a voice in who made local government decisions and set local tax rates, either, and none had effective leverage to force changes in local officials' behavior or policies. The county grievances reveal strong and widespread discontent with the county governments, not with the governor or his administration or with the king and his royal authority within the new empire. That essential fact is missing from the standard interpretive narratives of the rebellion.



Those were not new complaints, nor were the differences in perspective between landed and landless colonists new or surprising. The surviving records of every county for almost every decade in the colony's history contain evidence of resentment at what some people regarded as high-handed actions by officeholders and wealthy men who appeared to act as if they believed they were entitled to govern—and to govern however they pleased. The language in which that resentment was expressed and the manner in which the county courts attempted to regulate it or to suppress it exhibit the values and perspectives of both groups. There were degrees of dignity among free men, just as there were differences in degree between men and women and differences in degree between free men and their servants and enslaved laborers. Suggesting that a man had risen above his natural level or degrading a man below it were both serious offences because they undermined the social hierarchy that the structure and processes of government reflected and protected. The distinctions between the landed and office-holding class and the laboring and landless class were conspicuous and openly acknowledged.

Bernard Bailyn and Edmund S. Morgan in the twentieth century interpreted the many complaints and the often-turbulent insubordination as

evidence that the planters and justices of the peace and governor could not control a rootless mob of malcontents. The royal commissioners in the seventeenth century neglected the complaints and insubordination and therefore did not attempt to interpret them at all. That was a serious oversight. The complaints that appeared in the county grievances in 1677, which white men of all but the very highest and very lowest classes endorsed or wrote, employed a peculiar late-medieval English vocabulary that suggests evidence of class-consciousness. They called themselves the commons of Virginia or the *commonalty* to distinguish themselves from their wealthier or more powerful or more privileged neighbors. Earlier Englishmen and some men as late as Cromwell's time had used the word *commonalty* to identify people who were not of the landed gentry or the nobility. The word had virtually disappeared from use in England by the 1670s, but it was in use in Virginia then because it was exactly the right word for the lower orders of white residents to use to identify themselves and their own interests. Those distinctive words and phrases appeared in five of the sets of county grievances—including in the Henrico County recommendation that “at least six of the Comonalty” be permitted to join the justices of the peace in setting the county levy—and elsewhere, and variants on them or their essence appeared in many other documents, including Bacon's declarations that he signed as “General, by the consent of the people.”²⁹

Actions and words of lower-class white men that were consistent with the language of the county grievances of 1677 predated Bacon's Rebellion. In Surry County early in January 1674, the county's magistrates arrested and interrogated fourteen men who had met twice in December, first in the church of Lawne's Creek Parish and later in a place called the Devil's Field, charging that they conspired to refuse to pay their local taxes because the taxes were unjustly laid. The men who attended the meetings readily admitted that they had met and discussed and condemned the method that the county court had used to assess the taxes that they were supposed to pay.³⁰

That the justices of the peace had them all arrested and interrogated indicates that the magistrates, who for the most part belonged to the wealthier, landowning part of the community, believed that it was seditious for lesser men to question or even to discuss their official actions. The two principal justices of the peace who conducted the interrogations wrote a preface

for the collected documents in the case when they were copied into the county's public records. Justices of the Peace Lawrence Baker and Robert Spencer wrote "Of how Dangerous consequence unlawfull Assemblyes and meetings have bin, is Evident by the Chronicles of our Native Country wch are occasioned by the Giddy headed Multitude, & unless repressed may prove the ruin of a Country." The two justices described the fourteen men as "a Company of Seditious & rude people" who by "theire Contemptuous behaviour & Carriage, not respecting Authority" deserved to be arrested and prosecuted under the Riot Act.³¹

The justices of the peace fined the men and bound them over to appear before the next session of the General Court in Jamestown, at which time, in April 1674, it fined Mathew Swann, "the ringleader of them," two thousand pounds of tobacco and required all of the men to pay court costs. The following September the governor remitted Swann's fine "and alsoe the fines of the other poore men," provided that they "acknowledge there fault in the said County Court, and pay the Court Charges." The governor did not so much pardon their actions as mitigate their punishment for the sake of preventing further disorder, and he appointed Justice of the Peace Robert Spencer to the office of county sheriff the following November. That was how Berkeley had governed, keeping order by incorporating as many of the colony's white men as possible into his political orbit and system through obligation or conspicuous shared interest. Not so, the Surry County justices of the peace. That even discussion of the propriety of their actions appeared to them to warrant prosecution reveals a good deal about their values and how they believed that they were to be respected. The county's records also do not disclose that any of the men acknowledged fault or paid court costs, which reveals what the other poor men thought about their local government officers.³²

That episode has been exaggeratedly referred to sometimes as the Lawne's Creek uprising. It is moderately well documented, but it was not the only event of its kind. Later in 1674 some taxpayers in New Kent County also threatened to resist collection of the local taxes, and in 1675, Berkeley "appeas'd two mutinies . . . raysed by some secret villaines that wisphered amongst the people." There is no other surviving documentary evidence concerning those three events than Berkeley's passing references to

them, but the governor and county officials worried that small farmers and tradesmen might mutiny, just as they worried about unrest among indentured servants and enslaved laborers and about real criminals.³³

When it appeared in the mid-1670s that the Indians had suddenly become a danger to all of the English-speaking inhabitants of Virginia, disfranchised men and overtaxed small farmers complained that the most wealthy and most politically powerful of their neighbors were overbearing, exploitive, and abusive and that by their actions they also endangered the safety of everybody.

One of the three extant sets of 1677 grievances from Nansemond County, the one that exists only in transcription, includes a vivid narrative that dramatically brought all of the complaints about taxes and favoritism into focus. "Yor. Honrs. are sensible," the men of Nansemond informed the commissioners, "there was a rising in This part of the Country in May last," yet another of what at the time were called mutinies, "occasion'd by the greivous taxations & burthens wee lay under for many years before & to increase our pressures the militia would have Houses built intitl'd Forts under the pretence of destroying the Heathen." The authors of the grievances charged that the militia commanders had directed that the forts "be erected upon their owne lands which wee well perceived would have been the utter ruine of us the poore Comonalty & only self interest to themselves wee see & knowing the Heathen must be destroy'd by a moving force, and the charge of these forts would have gone beyond our ability either to maintaine or build." The militia commanders ordered the complaining militiamen "to assemble together," but at that muster the men "roared them down by a generall roar of Commonalty." Common militiamen shouting down commissioned officers! That must have been astonishing and frightening, a humiliating and potentially very dangerous exhibition of insubordination. The soldiers must have been very angry, indeed, to be so bold. That episode, which is described in only the one unpublished document, was much more serious than the so-called Lawne's Creek uprising.

"Yet," the men of Nansemond County continued, "our Militia order'd all manner of necessaryes as Axes, hoos, Halborrds, provisions & the like fitt for the worke & seeing ourselves in this sad condition the Heathen hourely expected to come upon us the excessive tax likewise that wee did readily

account needlesse, and unnecessary,” they asked permission to take their case to the governor. The commanding officers prudently “caused us to assemble ourselves together and every man to make his complaint personally.” The militia commanders, either frightened or perhaps cautious, may have emulated Berkeley in giving their disaffected men an opportunity to state their complaints, as if understanding the principle of the safety valve long before the invention of the steam engine. “And that it might be thought noe tumult,” the men’s narration continued, “(as God knowes wee were with noe tumultuous Intensions) wee chose five men to goe to his Honr.,” but Berkeley, who made several trips into the interior of the colony in the spring of 1676 to ascertain what Nathaniel Bacon and his men were doing, was “not at home” when the men from Nansemond County reached Jamestown. They related how “his Lady writ to his Honr: on our behalfes, and sent a Coppie of the letter downe to us, which was such a Satisfaction to us, that wee every man return’d to his owne home, for his Honr had appointed an Assembly to be on the fifth of May”—it was summoned for the fifth of June 1676—“& issued out Warrants for the chusing Burgesses & every free borne mans voat was hear’d in Election. Against which Assembly wee drew up our Grievances & sent by our Burgesses who gave us great Satisfaction at their returne most of our grievances being satisfied.”³⁴

The list of grievances that they “drew up” in 1676 is extant. That document is one of several unusual things about the June 1676 meeting of the General Assembly that deserve mention because they have been overlooked or misinterpreted. The contents of the county grievances of 1677 illustrate and explain those events and the sources of the complaints, but none of the historical narratives of Bacon’s Rebellion thoroughly exploited the evidence of pre-1676 discontent to explain with accuracy the importance of what the June 1676 General Assembly did. That discontent was as important a reason for the governor to call for the election of a new assembly as the necessity to prepare for war with the Indians. The two causes converged, as the Nansemond County narrative and other events indicate, by an accident of timing. When Berkeley, who was out west in Henrico County, issued his writ for the election of a new assembly “for the better security of the Country from our Barbarous Enemies the Indians and better settling and quieting our domestick disorders and discontents,” he also requested that “at the Election

of the said Burgesses all and every person or persons there present have liberty to present freely to their said Burgesses all just Complaints as they or any of them have against mee as Governor.” He also promised that he would “gladly joine with them in a Petition to his Sacred Majestie to appoint a new Governor of Virginia and thereby to ease and discharge mee from the great care and trouble thereof in my old age.” Berkeley specifically requested that the men elected to the House of Burgesses “discharge that duty of their owne personall charge for the ease of the Country” and not require the county taxpayers to pay their expenses. As the men from Nansemond County and elsewhere understood the writ for election, they not only had the right to submit all of their grievances to the assembly, but they also believed that the governor had allowed all free men to vote, ignoring the law of 1670, and many of them, in fact, voted.³⁵

The undated document (internal evidence clearly indicates that it was drafted in the spring of 1676) to which the 1677 Nansemond County grievances refers and which in parts closely resembles their 1677 grievances, began, “Considerations upon the present troubles in Virginia,” and opened, “The great oppression the people complaine of is the great taxes Levied on them Every yeer and the Unequall way of taxing them by the poles for that a poor man that hath nothing to maintain himself wife & child: pays as much for his levie as he that hath 2000 acres of Land.” The men of Nansemond County, either as petitioners addressing the General Assembly or as electors instructing their burgesses, requested that county sheriffs (who kept part of the tobacco they collected to compensate them for their work) not be permitted to serve more than one year at the time (as in England, and they cited English law on that point). They complained that the annual meetings of the assembly cost every free person in the county more tobacco than most could afford, not only to pay the expenses of the burgesses but also the 400 pounds of tobacco that the secretary of the colony charged each county for sending out the writ of election. Because of these “burdens the people began to Mutinie in the year 1674.” This was shortly after the Lawne’s Creek disturbances and at about the same time that the taxpayers in New Kent County threatened to withhold their tobacco. The authors of the Considerations of 1676 therefore recommended that burgesses and other officials not be paid large salaries, that local officers do their jobs without pay

to keep down taxes, and that such taxes as remained necessary “be levied by a land tax, which seems to be the most Equall Imposition, and will generally take of the complaints of the people, although perhapps some of the worst sorte wil not like it who hould greater proportions of land then they can make use of.”³⁶

The Considerations of 1676 and many of the grievances of 1677, in spite of the submissive form and tone in which they were phrased, bristle with resentment against local magistrates, sheriffs, militia officers, burgesses, and tax-exempt elites. The commissioners' formal report contains not one syllable about any of those dramatic events or serious complaints or any hints that the commissioners recognized their significance. Historical narratives that have provided the principal interpretations of the rebellion have missed almost all of those events and their significance. The county justices of the peace and the militia officers, not the governor or the king, were the primary objects of the most serious complaints.

The reformers elected to the June 1676 assembly passed laws to solve several of the most important domestic problems. The assembly required annual rotation in the office of sheriff; it forbade the holding of more than one local office at a time; it regulated fees and practices in the secretary's and the county clerks' offices; it authorized representatives of the people to be selected to meet with justices of the peace when the county taxes were laid; it required that vestrymen in each parish be elected every third year; it rescinded the tax exemption for members of the governor's Council; it quashed all legal proceedings instituted against participants in the “many unlawfull tumults routs and riotts in divers parts of this country”; it repealed the 1670 law that limited the vote to freeholders and housekeepers; and it permanently disqualified two wealthy men from Charles City County, Edward Hill and John Stith, from all public offices as a consequence of their bullying behavior and “stirring up the late differences and misunderstandings that have happened between the honourable governor and his majesties good and loyal subjects.”³⁷

Many of the people's grievances that could have fueled the spirit of rebellion were fully redressed at the June 1676 assembly that dealt with much more than the threat from the Indians. The laws of that assembly suggest that the political system over which Sir William Berkeley presided could

respond effectively or even justly to pressure for redress of grievances; but that does not answer the questions why those grievances grew to such a height that riots or mutinies took place in more than one-fourth of the counties before they could be redressed or why, if they had been redressed in June, Nathaniel Bacon was able to enlist a great many Virginians in his revolt against Berkeley's government in August.



What happened between 28 June when the assembly adjourned and 31 July when Bacon began issuing proclamations against Berkeley? The events of July 1676, while Bacon and the county militia officers were recruiting the new army, are poorly recounted in the contemporary narratives of events or in later recollections.³⁸

It is quite likely that the reforms of the June assembly were imperfectly known in much of the colony before the end of July. There being no printing press in Virginia, laws were published by being read out loud to the people—first on the statehouse steps on the day that the assembly adjourned and later at each courthouse when the monthly meeting of the county court took place.³⁹ If full handwritten sets of the laws of June 1676 were available for every county as early as their respective July court days—which is possible but by no means certain—only those people who were present and sober and paying attention throughout the long readings would have learned precisely what the laws contained. Other people may have learned little or nothing or heard about them only vaguely or piecemeal and therefore retained their grievances unabated. That would account in part for the appeal that Bacon's declarations carried.

At the end of July, Bacon issued *The Declaration of the People against Sir William Berkeley*, the first of his proclamations challenging the right of the governor to govern. The first in its long list of complaints was that the governor “having upon specious pretences of publick works, raised unjust taxes upon the Commonalty for advancing of private favourites and other sinister ends,” and the second was that he had “abused & rendered contemptible his Mties: Justices by advancing to places of Judicature Scandalous & ignorant favourites.” Those and other specifications

epitomized some of the numerous individual complaints contained in the county grievances of 1677 and blamed them all on Berkeley in 1676. Bacon attempted to supercede Berkeley as governor of the colony by appealing to men and women, in addition to the thousand-man army that he legally commanded, by repeating their complaints about county officials' misconduct and stating that they were the results of Berkeley's maladministration that introduced corruption and favoritism everywhere and consequently left the colony defenseless in the face of its enemies.⁴⁰

That is exactly what parts of the belated Charles City County grievances that the commissioners received in May 1677 appeared to state. The grievances recited a number of Bacon's charges against Berkeley and indicated that those charges appealed to "a handfull of poore ignorant and unlearned people, whose unskillfullnes in the law, may Easilye lay us open to divers failings." The men of Charles City County asserted that they were "seduced into believe" that Berkeley aspired to tyrannical government and that he appointed unqualified sycophants to office and raised taxes to support them and perverted the course and courts of justice. The Charles City County protest also included a long list of specific complaints about abusive and allegedly illegal behavior of Edward Hill, whom one of the June 1676 laws had barred from public office for those very acts. Berkeley had nevertheless appointed Hill to the command of the county during the rebellion, and it is entirely possible that Hill obstructed or delayed the compilation of the county's grievances in the spring of 1677. After it was clear that Berkeley was leaving Virginia, removing all official protection from Hill, angry residents of Charles City County compiled and submitted their list of grievances, which is much the longest of any of the county documents. It was easy for the commissioners and for readers of the belated Charles City County grievances, which scarcely resemble any of the others and are also among the few to have been published, to be seduced also into believing that Berkeley's misrule was the cause of the rebellion and that he and men like Hill had obstructed reform.⁴¹

It was also easy for royal officials in England and for later historians to read about the assembly's actions in June 1676 and believe much the same thing. Bacon's having extorted a general's commission from the assembly, the king and his ministers evidently believed that the entire budget of laws was

of Bacon's doing. In the autumn of 1676, when the king issued instructions to the three royal commissioners, he required that all of the laws of the June 1676 assembly be annulled, which the assembly did when it next met, which it did while the royal commissioners and the governor were getting at each others' throats in February 1677. In fact, although Bacon was elected to the June 1676 assembly from Henrico County, he did not attend it except to threaten it, and if he had a reforming agenda in June 1676, he never presented it. A good many supporters of Bacon's policy of waging aggressive war against the Indians were legal members of the assembly, and it was they who proposed and adopted the laws of June 1676 but in a legitimate parliamentary manner and with the consent of the governor and in the best tradition of representative government. In fact, the burgesses who passed the reform laws and also elected Bacon a general refused to endorse Berkeley's request that they join him in petitioning the king to replace him with a younger and more vigorous governor.⁴²

An unidentified person at an unidentified time later added the words "Bacon's Laws" to the sole, surviving manuscript text of the laws of the June 1676 session. When the laws were published early in the nineteenth century in William Waller Hening's *Statutes at Large*, the editor, no doubt having read John Daly Burk's history, also erroneously believed that Bacon had imposed the principal laws on the assembly and incorrectly identified the laws of that session as "Bacon's Laws," perpetuating a misinterpretation that may have also misled some historians.⁴³

The county grievances of 1677 and other evidence clearly show otherwise. The grievances disclose that the conditions that the laws of June 1676 remedied were under lively discussion before Bacon's Rebellion began and were not Bacon's work. The ill-informed king and his ministers did not understand that and ordered them repealed. Residents of Virginia knew the facts, however, even if the king and his commissioners did not. The Gloucester County grievances of 1677 specifically requested "That whereas Their were severall Grievances presented to the Assembly in June last, in order to prevent many exorbitant fees, & other Disorders in Governmt; upon which, many good lawes were consented to, & agreed upon by that grand Assembly; before the Rebell Bacon came to interrupt the said Assembly: We beg that those good & wholesom Lawes, may be confirmed."

But a similar request included in one of the sets of grievances from Nansemond County that a great many poor men made their marks on, to reinstate the work of their "Burgesses who gave us great Satisfaction," brought from the commissioners a tart response: "Impudent and mutinous to aske seeinge his Majestie has by his instructions and proclamation declared all that assemblys Laws null and void, because of Bacons force att the time upon the Assembly then sittinge."⁴⁴



The documentary record of Bacon's Rebellion, and particularly the county grievances of 1677, disclose that it was the actions of county officials, against whom county residents had no legal mode of redress, that created much of the anger and resentment that gave Bacon's declarations their appeal in 1676. Those local officials, integral and essential functionaries in the government of colonial Virginia, were not responsible to the people they governed and seldom had to answer to provincial officials who appointed them. Distrust and resentment were almost certain to result. As in England, Virginia's society and economy were conspicuously hierarchical, and people at or near the bottom often believed that they had reason to resent people at or near the top; and people at or near the top often believed that they had reason to distrust or fear people from below. The one group under such stressful circumstances was prone to riot or rebel, and the other group feared riots and rebellions. The attitudes of the men near the bottom are readily apparent in the language of the county grievances.

The attitudes of the men nearer the top are equally evident in their words. In 1676 and 1677 they used contemptuous language about the poor and laboring men that wealthy planters and government officials employed routinely during the seventeenth century. For instance, William Sherwood, who already was or soon would be attorney general of Virginia, wrote at the beginning of June 1676 that Bacon's first volunteers were "indigent & disaffected persons" and "rabble." Following the appearance of Bacon at the head of several hundred armed men later that month to wrest a general's commission from the General Assembly, Sherwood repeated the word "rabble" and wrote that Bacon's men were "the scum of the Country." Another influential

merchant-planter, Nicholas Spencer, when describing Bacon's followers at the beginning of August 1676, wrote, "hee is sufficiently strengthened with the Rabble, of which sort this country chiefly consists, wee serving as A sinke to drayne Engld of her filth."⁴⁵

Edward Hill's self-justification, which has been published and often-quoted, breathes the same contempt for his underlings. About the time that his friend Berkeley left Virginia, Hill composed a long and indignant response to the Charles City County grievances, filling both sides of fourteen large sheets of paper. Hill was utterly contemptuous of the men of his county who accused him of misbehavior, and he did not spare his words even when criticizing women. "Sarah Weeks," he wrote, was "an Idle infamous slutt to the highest degrees, of robing, thieving, & whoreing, &c." To be accused by those people was the worst possible insult. "I cannot but with trouble & sorrow consider," Hill began his response to the county complaints, "that to be called to a barr, & to be charged wth Severall Crimes & misdemeanors, & clamour'd against by a route of people, how base, malicious, envious, & Ignorant soever, it is still a lessening of reputation & darkening of good fame let ones Loyalty, inocency, Justice, & integrity be never so great." Hill also wrote that Governor Berkeley "by the Judgmt of the moste wise of this Country . . . hath been thought to have governed this thirty odd years wth the moste Candour, Justice, wisdom, & integrity, that was possible for man to governe, and more especially considering whome he had to governe."⁴⁶

Berkeley's close friend Philip Ludwell also described the members of Bacon's army as "the scume of the country." He characterized them as "men, whose fortunes & Inclinations being equally Desperate, were ffitt for the purpose there being not 20 in the whole Route, but what were Idle & will not worke, or such whose Debaucherie or Ill Husbandry has brought in Debt beyond hopes or thought of payment these are the men that were sett up ffor the Good of the Countrey; who for the ease of the poore will have noe taxes paied, though for the most part of them, they pay none themselves, would have all magistracie & Governmnt taken away & sett up one themselves, & to make their Good Intentions more manifest stick not to talk openly of shareing mens Estates among them selves." Ludwell also took pains to point out that not only did Bacon acknowledge no "Law of God or

man,” but he also frequently uttered many “new Coyned oaths of wch. (as If he thought God was delighted wth. his Ingenuite in that kind) he was very liberall.”⁴⁷

Other contemporaries also commented on Bacon's swearing. The governor was a devoted churchman and was especially disgusted at Bacon's profanity. “His usual oath,” Berkeley wrote, “which he swore at least a Thousand times a day was God damme my Blood,” language that other contemporary witnesses also reported (and that Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker deliberately excluded from his commentaries on Bacon's character, purposes, and actions). Berkeley continued, “and god so infected his blood that it bred lice in incredible numbers so that for twenty dayes he never washt his shirts but burned them. To this God added the Bloody flux and an honest minister wrote this Epitaph on him[:] Bacon is Dead I am sorry at my hart / that Lice and flux should take the hangmans part.” Berkeley, too, on occasion referred to Bacon's followers as rabble, but for a man charged with abusing his powers as governor, he was surprisingly and generally sympathetic to the plight of the people he governed, “considering,” as Edward Hill had written and he, too, might have believed, “whome he had to governe.”⁴⁸

Berkeley departed Virginia for England late in April 1677 but died before he was able to explain himself in person to his king. That closed the political career of an extraordinary man who lived and governed too long for his reputation, which the rebellion and his conduct during its aftermath permanently sullied. His widow remained in Virginia and made their Green Spring plantation the rallying point for the Virginia planters and politicians who strove to preserve the political and economic institutions and practices that were Berkeley's legacy. That legacy, which was firmly in place long before the rebellion challenged it, was a government of the tobacco planters, by the tobacco planters, and for the tobacco planters.

Even though the February 1677 General Assembly reenacted many of the laws of the June 1676 session, it did not reenact the most significant reforms that the king had ignorantly ordered repealed: restoration of white adult manhood suffrage, authority for the commonalty to participate in levying local taxes, and triennial election of vestrymen. In spite of all the sharp public criticism of the poll tax, the landowning men in the General Assembly and on the county courts never replaced it with a tax on land.

They did not increase taxes on themselves, even though during subsequent decades the men who owned increasingly large numbers of enslaved laborers did have to pay more taxes on that part of their property. The complaints that Virginia men recorded in the county grievances remained largely unmet. The county elites lost or yielded nothing to the commonalty.⁴⁹



The insulting language of Berkeley's adherents leaves a very different impression of Bacon's followers than their own language as recorded in the county grievances, and the dismissive language of the commissioners' narrative offers yet another perspective. The self-consciously literary chroniclers John Cotton and his wife Ann Cotton, who wrote in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, and Thomas Mathew, who wrote his memoir of the events in 1705, recorded their own distinctive portraits of the people and events of Bacon's Rebellion. Historians who have employed those different sources more or less indiscriminately have risked jumbling disparate interpretations and characterizations together without regard to the perspectives or purposes of the men or women who created them. And that the historians have nearly all disregarded or substantially neglected the language of the class of men who rebelled certainly weakened their narratives and undermined their interpretations.

The substance and the language of the county grievances, with their complaints about the conduct of local officials that are echoed in many other documents of the time, offer additional reasons why the interpretation of Bacon's Rebellion in Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker's *Torchbearer of the Revolution* as a democratic, home-rule antecedent of the American Revolution cannot be maintained. The documents contain language that Wertenbaker might have cited to good advantage had he focused on the substance of the complaints and who got blamed, but they were directed at local Virginia officials and not at royal officials or even at the old governor. Had Wilcomb Washburn made full use of the county grievances in *The Governor and the Rebel*, he would not have missed or under-appreciated the pre-1675 events and might therefore have been able to explain better why fighting that began when outlying settlers took matters into their own hands in the face

of perceived threats from the Indians then spread throughout the colony and became a rebellion in which hundreds or thousands of people participated for reasons that had little or nothing directly to do with the threat from the Indians. Had Edmund S. Morgan devoted more attention to the language of the county grievances in his *American Slavery, American Freedom*, he might have had to modify his characterization of the local elites as exercising insufficient control over the unruly lower classes to suggest that some of the lower classes believed that they were over- rather than under-governed. Had Stephen Saunders Webb employed the county grievances more systematically in *1676*, his interpretation of the subsequent Stuart crackdown on colonial governments might have been enriched with examples of how colonial governors and colonial assemblies had brought into being and nourished self-sustaining and irresponsible local government institutions that allowed discontent to arise and ripen into rebellion. The grievances demonstrate, as Warren M. Billings suggests in his biography of Berkeley, how the old governor became the unfortunate residual legatee of the local consequences of county government structures and practices that were in place and functioning when he first arrived in the colony thirty-four years earlier.

Fine modern scholarship on seventeenth-century Virginia's social history indicates that during the final years of the seventeenth century and into the first decades of the eighteenth century the tobacco planters ruled their households and their colony rather like the commonalty of Virginia in the 1670s charged that the justices of the peace had dominated the counties. In their households and in their tobacco fields, those men ruled as they believed they were entitled to rule, and they governed the colony as if they believed they were entitled to govern it. Other scholarship on the development of the slave economy suggests that economic, commercial, and agricultural considerations, not primarily the ease of regulating laborers, as Morgan in part suggested, motivated the planters' subsequent rapid shift from indentured to enslaved labor. The laws that their representatives in the General Assembly enacted exempted them from most of the restraints on how they managed their enslaved black laborers, legal and contractual restraints that governed and had governed their management of their white indentured and paid laborers, a population that in the latter years of the century was a declining proportion of all of the colony's laborers.⁵⁰

In the planters' patriarchy that emerged into full flower in the decades following Bacon's Rebellion, whether as a consequence of it or merely as a chronological coincidence, authority of all kinds was conspicuously concentrated: in the hands of the heads of households; in the hands of plantation patriarchs; in the hands of the self-perpetuating groups of men who sat on the parish vestries and county courts; in the hands of the influential men who held public office as clerks, surveyors, and customs officers, men who collected large fees and often served for life; and in the hands of the members of the governor's Council who received their lifetime appointments from the Crown.

The political and social institutions and practices of Virginia in the 1670s were strong enough to survive Bacon's Rebellion unchanged, even if they could not always control or repress aspiring or frustrated white men who resented overbearing elites or whose own failings or ill fortunes prevented them from joining the propertied and prosperous part of the population. The political institutions and practices also survived, largely in tact, the Stuart crackdown on colonial governments during the fifteen years following Bacon's Rebellion, even if in the long run they could not prevail in the planters' attempt to escape Parliament's navigation acts and stricter controls over colonial commerce.

Sir William Berkeley had preserved and strengthened the central institution of representative government, the General Assembly that had been formed in 1619, and therefore his legacy contained within it the essence of republican government, but it was in no way a democratic legacy, and it did not extend to local government. Social and political stratification persisted, and the increased reliance of the great planters on enslaved laborers amplified that stratification. There may be a chicken-and-egg problem in attempting to sort out whether the political and economic cultures of Berkeley's Virginia made the creation of the slave economy possible or whether the slave economy shored it up and allowed it to flourish. Either way, that was the origin of the Old South.⁵¹



NOTES

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1. For Moryson, see Jon Kukla, *Speakers and Clerks of the Virginia House of Burgesses, 1643–1776* (Richmond, 1981), pp. 54–57 and Warren M. Billings, *A Little Parliament: The Virginia General Assembly in the Seventeenth Century* (Richmond, 2004), esp. pp. 99–100; for Berry, see John T. Kneebone et al., eds., *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* (cited hereafter as *DVB*) (Richmond, 1998–), 1:461–62; and for Jeffreys, see Billings, *Little Parliament*, esp. pp. 78–79.
2. Warren M. Billings, *Sir William Berkeley and the Forging of Colonial Virginia* (Baton Rouge, 2004), pp. 210–11, 232–55.
3. Warren M. Billings, with the assistance of Maria Kimberly, eds., *The Papers of Sir William Berkeley, 1605–1677* (Richmond, 2007), pp. 568–73, 575–76 (quotation on p. 575).
4. Wiseman's copies of most of the essential documents that the commissioners collected are in the National Archives of Great Britain, Public Record Office, Colonial Office (cited hereafter as PRO CO) 5/1371, but the full final report is in the Pepsyian Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge University. It was published with an index that the publisher unfortunately muddled in Michael Leroy Oberg, ed., *Samuel Wiseman's Book of Record: The Official Account of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia* (Lanham, Md., 2005).
5. The original documents are in PRO CO 1/39, ff. 194–256 and PRO CO 1/40, ff. 140–47. Transcriptions of grievances from seven of the nineteen counties that responded (some with multiple sets of grievances) that were prepared in England in the 1870s and deposited in the Library of Virginia have been published: from Gloucester County, Lower Norfolk County, and Surry County (*Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* [cited hereafter as *VMHB*] 2 [1894]: 166–73), from Northampton County (*VMHB* 2 [1895]: 289–92), from Isle of Wight County (*VMHB* 2 [1895]: 381–92), from Rappahannock County (*VMHB* 3 [1895]: 35–42), and from Charles City County (*VMHB* 3 [1895]: 132–59). Some of those were reprinted along with the grievances from Westmoreland County, James City County, and Lancaster County in H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1659/60–1693* (Richmond, 1914), pp. 106–8, 110–11. All of those copies of copies are derivative and therefore at best second- or third-best texts.
6. Robert Beverley, *The History and Present State of Virginia*, edited by Louis B. Wright (Chapel Hill, 1947), pp. 74–85 and John Daly Burk, *History of Virginia from Its First Settlement to the Present Day* (4 vols.; Petersburg, 1804–16), 2:155–94. The evolution of the historiography of Bacon's Rebellion is thoroughly treated in Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel: A History of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1957), chaps. 1 and 10; Arthur Shaffer, "John Daly Burk's *History of Virginia* and the Development of American National History," *VMHB* 77 (1969): 336–46; Jane Carson, *Bacon's Rebellion, 1676–1976* (Jamestown, 1976); and John Harold Sprinkle, "Loyalists and Baconians: The Participants in Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, 1676–1677" (Ph.D. diss., William and Mary, 1992), pp. 9–24.

7. Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *Torchbearer of the Revolution: The Story of Bacon's Rebellion and Its Leader* (Princeton, 1940).
8. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel*.
9. Bernard Bailyn, "Politics and Social Structure in Virginia," in James Morton Smith, ed., *Seventeenth-Century America: Essays in Colonial History* (Chapel Hill, 1959), pp. 90–115.
10. Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975), pp. 215–49.
11. Warren M. Billings, "'Virginia's Deplored Condition,' 1660–1676: The Coming of Bacon's Rebellion" (Ph.D. diss., Northern Illinois University, 1968); Warren M. Billings, "The Causes of Bacon's Rebellion: Some Suggestions," *VMHB* 78 (1970): 409–35; and Warren M. Billings, "The Growth of Political Institutions in Virginia, 1634 to 1676," *William and Mary Quarterly* (cited hereafter as *WMQ*), 3d ser., 31 (1974): 225–42.
12. Billings, *Little Parliament*, pp. xix–xx. For political culture in colonial Virginia, see Darrett B. and Anita Rutman, *A Place in Time: Middlesex County, Virginia, 1650–1750* (New York, 1984); Jon Kukla, "Order and Chaos in Early America: Political and Social Stability in Pre-Restoration Virginia," *American Historical Review* 90 (1985): 275–98; Martin H. Quitt, "Immigrant Origins of the Virginia Gentry: A Study of Cultural Transmission and Innovation," *WMQ*, 3d ser., 45 (1988): 629–55; Jon Kukla, *Political Institutions in Virginia, 1619–1660* (New York, 1989); James R. Perry, *The Formation of a Society on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1615–1655* (Chapel Hill, 1990); James Horn, *Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill, 1994); and Edward L. Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony: Religion in Seventeenth-Century Virginia* (Macon, Ga., 2000).
13. Stephen Saunders Webb, *1676: The End of American Independence* (New York, 1984). A serious and searching critique of Webb's idiosyncratic and not-always accurate and sometimes internally inconsistent study is Wilcomb E. Washburn, "Stephen Saunders Webb's Interpretation of Bacon's Rebellion," *VMHB* 95 (1987): 339–52.
14. Billings, "Virginia's Deplored Condition," p. 16.
15. William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619 . . .* (13 vols.; Richmond, 1809–23), 2:101–2 and William H. Seiler, "Land Processioning in Colonial Virginia," *WMQ*, 3d ser., 6 (1949): 416–36.
16. Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large*, 2:280.
17. Compare Kevin Butterfield, "Puritans and Religious Strife in the Early Chesapeake," *VMHB* 109 (2001): 5–36 and Brent Tarter, "Reflections on the Church of England in Colonial Virginia," *VMHB* 112 (2004): esp. pp. 353–54; and John C. Coombs, "Building 'the Machine': The Development of Slavery and Slave Society in Early Colonial Virginia" (Ph.D. diss., William and Mary, 2003).
18. Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large*, 2:326–33; Billings, ed., *Papers of Sir William Berkeley*, pp. 504–10.
19. Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large*, 2:341–51; Billings, ed., *Papers of Sir William Berkeley*, pp. 534–38 (quotation on p. 537).

20. Declaration of the People against Sir William Berkeley, n.d. (c. 30 July 1676), two copies in Egerton MSS 2395, British Library.
21. Oberg, ed., *Samuel Wiseman's Book of Record*, p. 106.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 90–93, 130.
23. Billings, ed., *Papers of Sir William Berkeley*, pp. 520–21. The Long Assembly was a subject of remark only in the grievances of Stafford County (PRO CO 1/39, f. 203) and Surry County (PRO CO 1/39, f. 207).
24. Oberg, ed., *Samuel Wiseman's Book of Record*, pp. 250–56 and PRO CO 1/39, ff. 246–49, 250–51, 255.
25. PRO CO 1/39, f. 216.
26. *Ibid.*, ff. 194, 223–27.
27. *Ibid.*, f. 233.
28. *Ibid.*, ff. 207–9, 214.
29. Peter Thompson, “The Thief, the Householder, and the Commons: Languages of Class in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” *WMQ*, 3d ser., 63 (2006): 253–80. Variants on *commonalty* appeared in grievances from Henrico County (PRO CO 1/39, f. 233), Isle of Wight County (PRO CO 1/39, f. 223), Rappahannock County (PRO CO 1/39, f. 197), York County (PRO CO 1/39, f. 240), and the first set from Nansemond County (PRO CO 1/39, f. 246), in several of Bacon's declarations (PRO CO 1/37, ff. 128–29, 130–31, 133, 178–79), and in the brief newssheet, *Strange News from Virginia; Being a Full and True Account of the Life and Death of Nathanael Bacon Esquire* . . . (London, 1677).
30. Surry Co. Deeds, Wills, Etc., No. 2, ff. 40–44.
31. *Ibid.*, f. 40.
32. H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Minutes of the Council and General Court* . . . (Richmond, 1924), p. 367; Surry Co. Deeds, Wills, Etc., No. 2, fol. 69; Billings, ed., *Papers of Sir William Berkeley*, p. 459; Billings, *Sir William Berkeley*, pp. 227–28; and Alexander B. Haskell, “‘The Affections of the People’: Ideology and the Politics of State Building in Colonial Virginia, 1607–1754” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2006), esp. pp. 177–215.
33. Billings, ed., *Papers of Sir William Berkeley*, p. 507.
34. PRO CO 1/39, ff. 246–49.
35. Billings, ed., *Papers of Sir William Berkeley*, pp. 520–21, 537 (quotations on p. 520).
36. PRO CO 1/36, ff. 113–14.
37. Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large*, 2:352–60.
38. Berkeley's letter to Henry Coventry, 2 Feb. 1676/7 (Billings, ed., *Papers of Sir William Berkeley*, pp. 568–73) did not mention any events in July. Nor did *Strange News from Virginia*. Nor did William Sherwood's “Virginias deplored Condition Or an Impartiall Narrative of the Murders comitted by the Indians there, and of the Sufering of his Maties: Loyall Subiects under the Rebellious outrages of Mr Nathaniell Bacon Junr. to the tenth day of August Ao. dom 1676,” George Chalmers Collection, New York Public Library (and printed in *Collections of the*

Massachusetts Historical Society, 4th ser., 9 [1871]: 162–76). Nor did the undated narrative (but doubtless composed early in 1677) of John Cotton (for whom, see *DVB*, 3:482–83), Virginia Historical Society (cited hereafter as VHS), Richmond, printed in a modernized form as “The Burwell Papers” in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 2d ser., 1 (1814): 27–80, and from that text reprinted in volume one of Peter Force’s *Tracts and Other Papers, Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America* (4 vols.; Washington, D.C., 1836–46) and from Force’s text in Charles M. Andrews, ed., *Narratives of the Insurrections, 1675–1690* (New York, 1915), pp. 47–98, and in a more accurate version in the *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 9 (1867): 299–342. Nor did the abbreviated version of John Cotton’s narrative that his wife, Ann Cotton (for whom, see *DVB*, 3:481–82), later prepared and that was printed from an unlocated manuscript in the *Richmond Enquirer* of 12 September 1804, and from that text reprinted in Force’s *Tracts*. Nor did the narrative portion of the commissioners’ report, completed in the spring of 1677 and printed in Andrews’s *Narratives*, pp. 105–41, long before the modern edition of *Samuel Wiseman’s Book of Record*. Nor did Thomas Mathew’s “The Beginning, Progress, and Conclusion of Bacons Rebellion in Virginia in the Years 1675 & 1676,” 1705, Thomas Jefferson Papers, series 8, volume 1, Library of Congress, which was printed serially in the *Richmond Enquirer* of 1, 5, and 8 Sept. 1804 from a transcription that Thomas Jefferson made and from that source in Force’s *Tracts* and in Andrews’ *Narratives of the Insurrections*, pp. 15–41. All of those printed versions of those essential documents on which historians have relied are derivative copies of copies and therefore at best second- or third-best texts.

39. Philip Ludwell to Joseph Williamson, 28 June 1676, PRO CO 1/37, f. 38 (published in *VMHB* 1 [1893]: 178–86) and David D. Hall, “The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century,” in Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, eds., *A History of the Book in America, Vol. 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), pp. 57–65.

40. Declaration of the People against Sir William Berkeley, n.d. (c. 30 July 1676), two copies in Egerton MSS 2395, British Library.

41. PRO CO 1/40, ff. 140–47 (published in *VMHB* 3 [1895]: 132–147) and Oberg, ed., *Samuel Wiseman’s Book of Record*, p. 110.

42. Billings, ed., *Papers of Sir William Berkeley*, p. 550; Henings, ed., *Statutes at Large*, 2:380–81; and McIlwaine, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1659/60–1693*, p. 66.

43. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel*, pp. 13–14, 60, 67 and Brent Tarter, “Long Before the NHPRC: Documentary Editing in Nineteenth-Century Virginia,” *Documentary Editing* 30 (2008): 37–38.

44. PRO CO 1/39, ff. 243, 247 and Oberg, ed., *Samuel Wiseman’s Book of Record*, p. 250.

45. William Sherwood to Joseph Williamson, 1, 28 June 1676, PRO CO 1/37, ff. 1, 39–40 (published in *VMHB* 1 [1893]: 168–74) and Nicholas Spencer to Unidentified, 6 Aug. 1676, Coventry Papers, 77, f. 170, Longleat, Warminster, United Kingdom.

46. PRO CO 1/40, ff. 148–61 (published in *VMHB* 3 [1896]: 239–52, 341–49; 4 [1896]: 1–15).

47. Philip Ludwell to Joseph Williamson, 28 June 1676, PRO CO 1/37, f. 38 (published in *VMHB* 1 [1893]: 178–86).

48. Billings, ed., *Papers of Sir William Berkeley*, pp. 537, 572–73 (first and second quotations on pp. 572–73). The oath “God damme my Blood” was also reported in Sherwood, “Virginia’s

deploured Condition," p. 9 and in Mathew, "Beginning, Progress, and Conclusion of Bacon's Rebellion," p. 41.

49. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel*, pp. 60–63.

50. Excellent analyses of the status and roles of white women in the families of late seventeenth-century tobacco planters include Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996) and Terri L. Snyder, *Brabbling Women: Disorderly Speech and the Law in Early Virginia* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2003). Scholarship on the development of the slave economy includes Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill, 1986), Anthony S. Parent, *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660–1740* (Chapel Hill, 2003), and Coombs, "Building 'the Machine.'" For the linkages between families, economic status, and politics, see Emory G. Evans, *A "Topping People": The Rise and Decline of Virginia's Old Political Elite, 1680–1790* (Charlottesville, 2009).

51. Credit where credit is due: in a review of Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*, Jon Kukla described it as a study in the origins of the Old South (John Kukla, review of *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, by Edmund S. Morgan, *North Carolina Historical Review* 54 [1977]: 321–22).

